

THE AESTHETICS OF DISHARMONY: Beauty – Goodness – ... and the 20th Century

I

From ancient Greek philosophers – Pitagoras from Samos, his students and their followers – originate an ideal of life defines by them as *bios theoretikos*, contemplative life. *Bios theoretikos* is a connection of faith and science, mysticism and rationalism. What kind of role did art play in this relationship?

Art, as their understood it, appealed to three spheres and represented meeting or relation of three attitudes:

- a) Activities based on mathematics – numbers are attended here as constitutive for the world;
- b) Creations based on aesthetics – harmony marks elements of work of art here;
- c) Worships based on theory – man participates in an event with intention of contemplating divine.

And harmony dominates over all human actions and thoughts, because for Pitagorean harmony means balance between moral, artistic, scientific and religious activity of man. Authentic *theoria* stays in so understood harmony.

Theoria as aesthetic category sends as back to contemplative function of art. This function is united with attitude of spectator/observer, which looks and sees. Attitude of spectator is proper to intelligent man, because his aim is cognition, and not a profit or fame. The notion of inspection (*thea*) was seen as wide, including two types of attitudes: of scholar, which studies a thing and observer, which looks at thing. To ancient philosopher *aisthesis* – as awareness of object was united with noesis – as his mental seizure. Contemplation, however, was not a passive usage of artistic products (their inspection only), but was an active participation in

theory (their rational reception also); *noesis* filled up *aisthesis*, creating one wholeness. Arystoteles for example, postulated life consistent with mind, and such life is not easy at all. Contemplation, united with the notion of *theoria*, is important for art and science alike. So, contemplative approach, as one aspect of *bios theoretikos*, contains epistemological and aesthetic meaning.

In Aristotle's and his Pitagorean predecessors' seizure, *theoria* meant both contemplation of cosmos and contemplation of nature in context of truth and beauty. One can point out three elements of notion of theory:

- a) perceiving of order and proper proportion;
- b) perceiving of harmony;
- c) reacting with love.

And so, an attitude of disinterestedness is essentially tight up with the notion of contemplation.

In consequence aesthetics stays in relationship with ethics and science (cosmology), for ancient philosophers, as at their bases stay the same metaphysical foundations. Art gains then ethical dimension, because contemplation of art sends back to contemplation of nature and universe, while contemplation of prevalent order in cosmic phenomena makes man moral. A circle has been closed in this manner. Contemplative function of art is connected with didactic or better to say psychagogic function, convincing man to accept order of state, also. This order is marked with laws of these, which have knowledge, and so philosophers. So, propagation of order perceived in universe was de facto propagation and development of culture.

In twentieth century a tie between *kállos* and *agathón*, between beauty and good becomes torn out. And values of beauty and good either lose their meaning, or are recognised as completely unimportant. A meeting between agent and art loses its exceptionalities too, devoid valuing foundation now. One may observe a change in relation between *aisthesis* and *noesis*, as well, which was natural for ancient Greeks. A forgetfulness of these elements in art make it poor and her reception is limited to one aspect; in general it is an oblivion of something, what in ancient philosophy founded harmonious relationship of man with external world and with world of his products, too.

So what has changed in the art and her reception, what in effect deprived art its strength of transferring a subject to ideal values, or to ideas of value itself? This question gathers a dramatic character, nowadays.

II

While one can speak about multiplicity of existential experiences, which give reasons to activities of contemporary art and researches in her precincts, there clearly can be seen however the traces of two kinds of experience in it:

1) an experience formed in mode of modern science and techniques. This kind of experience is guided by subject experiment, and it is planned investigation, which aim is to capture and to transform an objective reality;

2) an experience having hermeneutic character, in which dominates understanding, receptive and contemplative attitude, close to accumulation of practical experiences.

First kind of experience unexpectedly gained importance in contemporary artistic practice, even if this importance became clearly weakened in context of the present science. Of course, it is not the point that certain rules of scientific experience were conveyed into art. Situation is not so easy and clear. But in general, we deal here with mixture of many motifs. However one can point certain features, which are common elements:

A) an experiment keeps importance so long, as long some other experiment will not weaken it (this is why a novelty appears to be its essential feature);

B) an experiment has non-historic character in this sense, that it expresses indifference on a background of theory;

C) in experiment there takes place a subordination of object, in a sense of its manipulation and usage;

D) an experiment has in general notional character;

E) there happens to arise something, what Lyotard calls “joyful aesthetics of experimentators”;

F) there is no place in such aesthetics for metaphysics of unity and wholeness (Adorno);

G) so art loses its metaphysical sense.

This type of experience appears to exert especially strong influence on 20th century art, because it regulates activity of different changes of vanguard and neo-vanguard and directed on experiment, shock and provocation Lyotard's type of post-modernity. Artistic activity inspired with this experience aims in direction of deepening processes of intellectualisation and institutionalisation of art.

Experience of second kind, which one can qualify as aesthetic, and which can be situated in hermeneutic horizon, possesses different features from presented above. So this hermeneutic in character experience determines natural context of artistic creation and artistic activities, in which a presence of traditional values of art, such as importance of beauty, or significant of forms, are highly respected. One underlines historic character of art in this experience. Gadamer says, that:

“Tradition, conditioning man, is necessary condition of possibility of recognition.”

Cognition of work of art takes place in consciousness formed by history. Art, going out from such foundations, keeps distance in the face of

excessive claim of intellect and institutional structures in art. Their exemplification can be different eclectic trends of post-modernity in mood of Charles Jencks, ecological art and creation of artists working outside the range of "empire of media".

III

The change of "aesthetic consciousness" of artists has caused a change of their approach to this, what was seen as great and authentic in art. Artist loses their exceptionalities, but an idea of *furor divinus* or inspiration does not favour him already. Artist resigns from the conviction that he/she is very special and unique, and in a consequence that artistic creation belong to the chosen ones. Indeed, we know that. Beuys has told us that everybody can be an artist and Duchamp and Warhol have shown that everything can be a work of art. Paradoxically, an artist itself often resigns from own position and exclusive rights to the created works, what in consequence drives to changes of account between creator and receiver. The creation as a process running in tension and isolation, often changes into co-creation taking place in atmosphere of relaxing play. There happens to follow a parallel change in importance of delivered contents. Instead of important, universal contents appealing to the transcendence (both idea, and sacrum alike), There dominates ordinariness banal or vulgar, sentimental or cruel, "recorded" in the manner of play and entertainment.

Creative act, as a consequence of analytic or more widely scientific attitude, extracts the category of artistic experiment, which base is in an intention, a concept, and an idea. We are appealed to the notional spheres, the sphere of ratio as a constitutive element of a reception of art. The viewer of such art can not speak in this instance about sharing the feeling with the artist, about community of value and experiences. Now, a man, an artist stands up vis-à-vis the world, stops to be its part, seizes its from outside.

Once executed, experiment becomes a base for duplicating it, in many variation of styles. The experiment as such gives however partial knowledge, what forces to undertake next one to gather next part of knowledge, which is equally fragmentary and separate as preceding one. There is obvious need for new experiment in this methodology, what becomes self-impelling mechanism. This methodological and philosophical vein is the background for the function of the art of the second part of the last century. This art appeals to radically seen "aesthetics of novelty", which consists on pushing barriers of this, what it is aesthetically, or morally, or religious or legally admissible. The extreme form of this aesthetics of novelty is the art appealing to ideology of shock exploring such subjects as: death, sex, religion or intimacy of others. There are many artists belonging to this art: Valie Export, Otto Muehl, Andreas Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, Zbigniew Libera, Katarzyna Kozyra, Alicja Żebrowska.

Of course, the changes mention above, have distinct consequences for art, both this connected with tradition, and connected with modernity, post- modernity. Authentic work of art in view of H.G. Gadamer for instance is characterised with timeless presence and changeless actuality, it displays something covered, it is present for every present, it carries ready words on every future and at last meeting with it destroys the ordinairiness and send to higher values and order.¹ Such work possesses timeless topicality and the power capable of change beholder's life. These values and features of the art have been changing nowadays and replaced by new ones. According to F. Lyotard for instance, the art sends beholder back to itself, and not to hidden meaning; it appeals to the category of novelty; it is game based on relative rules. In this trend of thinking a man itself becomes a work of art, transforming its own life into art.² This change of object of aesthetics drives also to changes of questions, and so the given answers: a question of essence – “what is beauty?” – is replaced by question of membership – “what is beautiful?”

The category of novelty has been upraised to highest ranks and gathers features of counter-value in our culture. The novelty very quickly stops to be new replaced by novelty of new artworks. It means then, that pressure of novelty to appear gives its constant exchange. This pressure causes, that we deal with temporariness and transition of artistic phenomena. They gain a character of fashion, in consequence. Qualities, naturally associated with novelty, as freshness, exceptionality, or revelation, quickly lose their own power and desirability. In this chase behind novelty there appears an element of auto-destruction consisting on getting dull the sensibilities of beholders. New stimulation should (or has to) be adequately stronger to guarantee expected reaction. The creation and the art become the game of provocative ideas. In this way attractiveness or even fascination of novelties goes to exhibition of the negative values.

I will use such a metaphor: aesthetic experience unites with the art, which was treated as a mirror reflecting external world, which itself was the medium to the world of mystery. Such art embraced the present – this, what was public, but also these what was mysterious – the past and the future. This art represented the experience and the common values. But instead, scientific experience unites with art, which is broken mirror. This mirror reflects not one common world, but its many different fragments, enigmatic (puzzling), however, but not mysterious. The broken mirror of the present day reflects also many different thoughts and philosophies expressed by individual artists or some movements. Who knows, who

¹ H.G. Gadamer, *Rozum, słowo, dzieje. Szkice wybrane*, [Reason, Word, History. Selected Works] M. Łukasiewicz, K. Michalski (transl.), Warszawa 1979, pp. 120, 125, 127.

² P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, New York 1984, p. 340.

remembers all “-ism”, which appeared in last forty years. Philosophy of a break is then philosophy of a lack of authority – a master, or a saint. In this situation of promiscuity of criterions every one can stand up to “election”, choosing and proclaiming oneself a master or saint.

There is only a place for the truth of a man as an individual in the broken world, e.t. and this means the truth of a moment and a fragment, of experience and phenomenon, and also of an excitement of a choice and violence of an activity. In axio-pragmatic sphere of the realisation of values in such world there is in effect chase after the novelty, which often as a result of semantic promiscuity is united with originality. But in the result of exhaustion of attractiveness of originality as the novelty, it becomes original itself, even it directs itself into ordinariness, vulgarity and brutality.

I believe we have a following couple of opposite notions: tradition-mystery-experience, on the one side and novelty-puzzle-exiting moment, on the other. The main features of experience are as follows:

- A) its relationship with the tradition and the community;
- B) its continuity and the general character;
- C) its “faint taste of eternal truths” (Gadamer);
- D) its enriching personality of a man, and at last;
- E) It stays in it both collective feeling, and individual continuity of tradition, gathered in the life practice.

Exiting moments possess different features; they are called out by the experiment as a “punctual event”. In consequence they receive themselves punctual character, separate from greater whole. This separation and punctuality of an event results from making novelty on startling and shocking character. And so the present situation of man expresses dramatic tension, which poles are marked by the above mentioned categories: experience settled down in tradition, and novelty connected with the present.

There is no way to exhaust richness of meanings and senses lying in the mystery. But the riddle has one-level character and dissolved leaves into oblivion. I think, that mystery is a challenge put before “historic” man, while riddle is a challenge put before a man of the “present”.

The problem shortly discussed in the paper is just one from plots, or motives, which one can point in the present art. It touches some other questions, which have been discussed since a long time. One can express them as an opposition of notions of an inspiration and production, or artistic creations and cultural industry. This change in modern art and of course modern culture give cultural egalitarianism but an atrophy of value, as well.

Well, quo vadis poetae? Quo vadis artifeks?